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INFO RHMFSS/18WG CP KADENA AB JA

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RHMFSS/CG FIRST MAW

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RUHBANB/CG MCB CAMP BUTLER JA

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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

RUYLBAB/DODSPECREP OKINAWA JA

RUESOK/FBIS OKINAWA JA

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RHHJJAA/JICPAC HONOLULU HI

RHHMBRA/JICPAC PEARL HARBOR HI

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

RHMFSS/NAVCRIMINVSRVRA OKINAWA JA

RHEHAAA/AMEMBASSY NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

RUHBANB/OKINAWA AREA FLD OFC US FORCES JAPAN CAMP BUTLER JA

RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE 0289

RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO 0251

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0071

RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 0020

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0651

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NAHA 000241

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/16/2031

TAGS: JA PREL MARR

SUBJECT: OKINAWA GOVERNOR'S RACE VERY CLOSE, BUT WINDS SHIFTING TO CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE NAKAIMA

CLASSIFIED BY: Kevin K. Maher, Consul General, American Consulate General Naha, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) With just three days left until the November 19 Okinawa gubernatorial election, all the media in Okinawa and both campaign camps still say they see the race as too close to call. Nevertheless, we are willing to go out on a limb and predict a narrow victory by the conservative candidate Hirokazu NAKAIMA. The most recent polls from last weekend showed the two candidates still neck and neck, with up to 30 percent of voters still undecided. But the Okinawa construction and other industry groups have become very active later in the week in get-out-the-vote campaigns in support of Nakaima. The junior ruling party Komeito also now is actively doing the same, with full support from its rank and file. The same polls showed that only 20 percent of voters see "the base problem" as the main issue in the campaign, even though anti-base and reformist-backed candidate Keiko ITOKAZU has tried to make this the focus of the election. Labor unions, traditionally a bedrock of support for the reformists, are lukewarm, with some telling their members to vote their own conscience.

¶12. (C) In our view, even though the election remains extremely close, the winds have shifted in Nakaima's favor, as most voters are citing bread and butter issues such as the need for economic development, Okinawa's high unemployment rate, and worries about pensions and welfare issues as their main concern. These are areas of strength for Nakaima, given his background as a former MITI official, Chairman of the Okinawa Chamber of Commerce, and Chairman of the Okinawa Electric Power Company. Itokazu on the other hand has become a one-issue anti-base candidate seen by many as having little to say or to offer on these issues. She is, however, a stronger candidate if the floating voters turn the election into a beauty contest, since she is much more photogenic, charming, and personable than is Nakaima, even in the eyes of his conservative supporters.

¶13. (C) In terms of the election's impact on U.S. policy, we note that the Governor of Okinawa has little direct role in Japan's security policy, which is decided in Tokyo. Nevertheless, a victory by Itokazu would entail four years of shrill antagonism to our base presence in general and in particular to the Alliance Transformation and Alliance (ATARA) initiatives agreed by our two governments at the October 29, 2005 Security Consultative Committee. Throughout her career as a peace bus guide, in the Prefectural Assembly, and more recently as a national Dietmember, Itokazu has consistently opposed the U.S.-Japan security alliance and the Security Treaty, and the presence of U.S. bases in Okinawa. Instead of supporting military forces, she says, Japan simply should sign a peace treaty with the other nations of Asia. Her platform calls for removing all U.S. bases from Okinawa by 2014, and she says she absolutely rejects the plan to relocate Marine Corps Air Station Futenma within Okinawa. At the same time, she stresses that she would see her election to Governor as a referendum on the

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Futenma relocation and the overall presence of U.S. bases in the prefecture.

¶14. (C) But even if Itokazu were to win on Sunday, we should not see that as a crisis for our base presence in Okinawa, nor as the end of our realignment plans. We have had reformist Governors in Okinawa before, and although they can be a thorn in our side, they have little actual authority with respect to base issues. Local mayors have told us that they simply ignore the governor's office when they have issues involving the military bases, and they instead go directly to Tokyo, since they know the Governor's office has no real role other than that of influencing public opinion when it comes to our base presence. The one important exception to this is the legal requirement that the Governor approve permits necessary for landfill work in water areas, needed as part of the MCAS Futenma relocation. But even in this case, we note that the Government of Japan has told us consistently during the realignment discussions the past year that it would pass special legislation to remove that authority from the Governor in the event the Governor could not be persuaded to sign those permits. We expect this special legislation would be needed under an Itokazu administration.

¶15. (C) Just as there would not be a crisis under Itokazu, we should not expect all to be rosy under Nakaima. As a conservative backed by the LDP and Komeito, Nakaima is a supporter of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and publicly accepts the need for a U.S. base presence in Okinawa, although he has said he feels Okinawa bears too large of a burden as compared to the rest of Japan. But sounding like current conservative Governor Keiichi INAMINE, during the campaign Nakaima has opposed the current plan of the two governments to relocate MCAS Futenma to a V-shaped runway to be built at Camp Schwab. Nakaima has said that his main objection to the V-plan is that it was decided with too little input from Okinawa. Although he had told us privately before the election campaign officially began that he would, if elected, accept the Futenma relocation plan in some shape, but that he could not publicly accept it as a candidate, it remains to be seen how he will reconcile this with his public opposition if elected.

¶16. (C) He has maintained some flexibility to come around to supporting the Futenma relocation plan by stating that once elected he intends to consider the views of the intended hosts, the northern communities in Nago surrounding Camp Schwab who have accepted the relocation. He also has affirmed his intention to participate in GOJ-OPG-municipal consultations about the Futenma plan and the economic promotion measures the central government has tied to the relocation.

¶17. (C) In what could be a more troubling initiative, Nakaima has called for the "elimination of the danger" of MCAS Futenma within three years, even though the aggressive schedule in the relocation plan aims at moving Futenma not until 2014 once the new facility is completed. Nakaima's call for "eliminating the danger" within three years sounds very much like Governor Inamine's call for a "temporary heliport" to be built so Futenma can be closed earlier, a proposal which both governments have

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studied and repeatedly rejected as unworkable for operational and other reasons. Nakaima has offered no specifics on how the danger at Futenma could be eliminated within three years, but only says that there must be "some way" that this could be done.

¶18. (C) Despite these campaign statements by Nakaima, clearly he would be a better governor in terms of U.S. interests in Okinawa, and also better for Okinawa in terms of the prefecture's economic development and its relations with Tokyo. Our assessment of Nakaima is that he would be a pragmatist with whom we could develop a good working relationship.

¶19. (C) Whichever candidate wins the November 19 election, we think we will need to continue to press the GOJ to stick to our agreed ATARA transformation and realignment plans and schedules.

With respect to Okinawa, our recommendation is that in public statements we note that we respect the democratic process in Okinawa, congratulate the new Governor, note that our two governments have agreed on a transformation and realignment plan that will be very good for Okinawa when implemented, state that we expect the Government of Japan to continue on its steady course of implementing that plan, and that we hope for the cooperation of the new Governor in that implementation.

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